

Christmas Eve
All Saints" Church

The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Year C 2018

Isaiah 9:1-7
Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

We give thanks for all our angels who tell us, "Do not be afraid." Amen

Merry Christmas. We celebrate tonight the birth of the babe in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes who awakens us to our own births, our own hopes and dreams and the fullness of life and liberty and love. Merry Christmas.

I love coming to church in the dark stillness of the night. Even better during the darkest days of the year, with the winter solstice just passed, the Northern Hemisphere covered in womb-like gestation, deep and inviting. "Come rest here," the earth calls out," take solace, put down your weary body, your troubled burdens, breathe deep, slow down, ponder the things of your heart, and heal.

"Be aware of the mystery of life which pulsates even during the profound silences of waiting. Let the deep quiet rise, like a river running through you. Listen to the hidden roots of your being stirring, maybe shivering, with longing, in anticipation, in hopes... for what you may not know, yet let the question speak to you."

One Christmas Eve, when I was young, around 25, I was the guest to an Italian family living on a farm just outside Florence. At the time, I was discouraged, barely making ends meet in my cold little hut on the edge of a vineyard in Impruneta, another little town outside Florence. I was walking in darkness, in the land of gloom, with no light on the horizon. It was not a good time in my life. I was afraid, lost, lonely and feeling left behind.

Yet, I was invited to be a guest in a wonderful home, filled with welcoming cheer. I decided to take the advice of a friend, "fake it until you make it," and said, "Yes, thank you, I will come," and packed an overnight bag. It was Christmas Eve, after all.

I arrived around 4:00 pm, just as dark was descending. After an early simple supper, I was escorted to a pitch-dark guest room to take a nap, as everyone was taking a nap before the Midnight Mass. Immediately, I fell into a deep sleep. And then a few hours later, I awoke to monks chanting.

At the time, I didn't know it was monks chanting. My host had turned on a recording and the music was being piped through the speakers placed throughout their home. I had no prior experience of this kind of music. I awoke to sounds beyond the trap door of my living. Other-worldly.

I couldn't see a thing, the room still shuttered tight, with no light, I had no idea where I was, who I was, if I were alive or dead. It was as if I were both. If alive, would I live another minute? If dead, it didn't matter, as I felt so much peace.

The haunting eeriness of the monks' chant settled into my chest, heavy and yet light. I was me and not me. Lost and yet found.

I waited. I knew consciousness was going to return. I was in no rush. I didn't want to lose the peace. I didn't want to know who I was or where I was. I wanted to stay in this inviting space between the footsteps of living. To trust in it.

There was a knock at the door, and my host handed me a candle. We stepped out their front door, greeted by a clear cold night sky packed with stars. Their home was at the top of a hill, and I could see the village church below in the valley, all lit up by candlelight. The bells were tolling.

And people were walking. There were no cars. All were walking along cattle paths and wagon trails, with hand held candles and lanterns. With only this light, we walked two by two, arm in arm. And then as we got close to the church, the Christmas Carols began. We were all singing. Walking together toward the Birth of the Baby Jesus, proclaiming joy to the world.

As I walked arm in arm, leaning on my host, I knew in my sadness and in my fear and in my gloom, during that blessed time of monks chanting, and my not knowing who I was or where I was, that in that dark waiting, there had been a birth. An awakening of something very deep, a goodness beyond imagining, that was both me and not me and I was walking toward its power. If I had to put words to it, it would be something like, "You are precious; you are loved; you belong to me." A home-coming of sorts.

Isn't that what Christmas is- a home-coming of sorts? In the midst of all the doom and gloom, chaos, war, violence and poverty, a child is born, lying in the manger, with no room in the inn. With this birth, this child, a gift is given, to become the Light to the World, a light shining in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. This child, this birth will become a Sign that the Love of Power, which always seems to dominate, will never win. Love conquers death. The Love of Power will become the Power of Love.

Our Christmas story is not sentimental. The cradle will become the wood for the cross. The feeding trough a tomb. Mary's heart of joy will be pierced. Joseph who wraps Jesus with swaddling clothes will become another Joseph who wraps the crucified Jesus in burial linens. For the one wrapped in swaddling clothes is also bound in fine linen and anointed for burial, all at the same time. For Jesus, life and death, are one in the same. Indeed, we, too, are both living and dying, simultaneously.

Our Christmas story is not sentimental. Rather, it is a story that announces from angels on high that the mystery of God's love is God moving into our humanity. To be a creator separate was not enough, but to share our frailty was.

The fullness of God is born as a child, destined to die, yet destined to live forever, as the deep pounding heartbeat that resides in all of us, that tells us always, just as Jesus did: "You are precious; you are loved; you belong to me."

Christmas Eve invites us to not rush, to rest in the dark, silent night, and to listen to the hidden roots of our being stirring, maybe shivering, with longing, in anticipation, in hopes... for what, you may not know.

Could it be possible that the what you may not know is speaking to you tonight, singing to you, chanting even, leading you deeper and deeper into that sacred place, beyond the trap door of our living, where we are held by the Heart of Light and Love, forever.

AMEN